

# **Translation and Social Media Communication in the Age of the Pandemic**

**Edited by  
Tong King Lee and  
Dingkun Wang**

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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>List of contributors</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction: Translation in the time of #COVID-19	1
TONG KING LEE AND DINGKUN WANG	
1 Cabin'd, Cribbed, Confin'd: How the COVID-19 pandemic is changing our world	12
SUSAN BASSNETT	
2 Translating Knowledge, Establishing Trust: The role of social media in communicating the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands	26
JOSÉ VAN DIJCK AND DONYA ALINEJAD	
3 Trust and Cooperation through Social Media: COVID-19 translations for Chinese communities in Melbourne	44
ANTHONY PYM AND BEI HU	
4 Parallel Pandemic Spaces: Translation, trust and social media	62
SHARON O'BRIEN, PATRICK CADWELL, AND TETYANA LOKOT	

vi *Contents*

5	Hello/Bonjour Won't Cut It in a Health Crisis: An analysis of language policy and translation strategy across Manitoban websites and social media during COVID-19	78
	RENÉE DESJARDINS	
6	On Memes as Semiotic Hand-Grenades: A conversation	98
	M <sup>a</sup> CARMEN ÁFRICA VIDAL CLARAMONTE AND ILAN STAVANS	
	<i>Index</i>	115

# 4 Parallel Pandemic Spaces

## Translation, trust and social media

*Sharon O'Brien, Patrick Cadwell, and Tetyana Lokot*

### Introduction

The role of translation (and interpreting) in crisis, emergency or disaster settings has garnered increasing attention over the past few years, even prior to the current COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Federici 2016; Federici and O'Brien 2020; O'Brien and Federici 2020; Cadwell 2020; O'Mathúna and Hunt 2020; Leeson 2020; Tesseur 2020). The emerging scholarship on the topic of translation in crisis settings illustrates a growing interest in the area as well as the breadth of topics that need to be considered. While there is a growing field of scholarly work on the intertwining of social media and translation on the one hand, and on the role of translation in crisis settings on the other, specific efforts on social media and crisis communication tend to have a blind spot with regard to the role of translation and translator (professional or volunteer) in disseminating information (whether accurately or not) and, ultimately, in dictating behaviour and outcomes in crises such as the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Desjardins (2017) makes a strong case for the study of online social media (OSM) *and* translation by stating that the increased use of OSM has an impact on aspects of human communication and, therefore by extension, on translation. This impact touches specifically on how translators translate, the type of content they translate and the languages being translated (4). Drawing on Standage (2013), she remarks that there is nothing novel about social media but rather the medium on which it takes place and the speed at which communication now occurs are novel (Desjardins 2017: 14). As we shall see, these points are highly relevant for translation in crisis communication via social media, that is speed, the endless communicative loop, and the symbiotic exchange are especially significant for crisis settings.

As stated above, the work done to date on social media and translation for crisis settings specifically is relatively limited. Desjardins (2017) lists ‘Translation, Crisis Management and OSM’ as one area of study that scholars have given attention to, in particular on the use of web technologies and OSM for the dissemination of communication in disasters and humanitarian response settings. Sutherlin (2013) provides a detailed discussion of the potential and pitfalls of crowdsourcing translation in a crisis. Marlowe (2020) highlights that transnational networks are part of refugees’ everyday lives and that social media platforms can provide access to trusted translated communications to these communities during times of crisis. He distinguishes between ‘crisis-near’ and ‘crisis-far’ events and illustrates how social media can be used by refugees to warn and provide support to their transnational networks.

In 2021 it has become crystal clear to the entire world how important information is in responding to a global pandemic. COVID-19 was, to use Marlowe’s words (2020), both a ‘crisis-near’ and a ‘crisis-far’ event in that the entire world was affected and infected, as travel across boundaries aided the virus’s transmission, which in turn led to international, national and local control measures. This happened in the physical world that we occupy. COVID-19 was, at the same time, a pandemic that occurred in the parallel space of the online world. In fact, national and local restrictions forced many people and activities online that previously only, or mainly, took place in physical spaces. We shared our information, experiences and emotions online and, of course, we did this in multiple languages and sometimes via translation. COVID-19 created a parallel pandemic space that was mediated via translation, sometimes with positive and sometimes with negative outcomes.

### **Communication, influence and trust in social media networks**

Though the networked communicative spaces of social media can be thought of as parallel to the material spaces we exist in, they are closely interlinked. We routinely rely on social media to keep connected with family members, friends and co-workers, and this has only intensified with the minimization of face-to-face contact during the pandemic restrictions. Therefore, understanding how communication happens and how information travels on social media demands that we attend to the dynamics of these networked spaces, where interactions and communities are restructured by the affordances of digital technologies.

boyd (2010) proposes a useful conceptual model for understanding social media sites as networked publics restructured by digital technologies. These publics become simultaneously the space constructed by those technologies and the imagined community that forms 'as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (39). These constellations of users, technologies and practices give rise to certain dynamics, such as the blurring of public and private contexts and the possibility of accidental or intentional communicative context collapse (Davis and Jurgenson 2014) between different social groups, including in multilingual communicative spaces.

We propose to apply the analytic lens of networked communication to examine social media spaces as networked publics where users communicate with each other and where specific users (nodes in the network) who act as translators play more important roles in how far information travels and how it is perceived by their networked communities. Adapting the classic two-step flow model of communication (Nisbet and Kotcher 2009; Choi 2015) to the networked environment, we critically explore the role of social media users in translating information during the pandemic, drawing on interview data collected from specific stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The two-step flow model of communication (Nisbet and Kotcher 2009; Choi 2015) suggests that information in networked spaces does not always travel in linear, hierarchical ways, and highlights the important role of micro-influencers (Abidin and Brown 2018)—users who are well-connected across networks and enjoy a certain level of credibility or trust, as well as intimacy, within their immediate networked communities. Such micro-influencers or micro-celebrities (Tufekci 2013) do not always have large followings, but are perceived as authoritative figures by their peers and are often seen as key channels providing curated information about important political, social or cultural matters; as potential agents of mobilization (Tufekci 2013); and as role models guiding decision-making, including in crisis situations (Buijzen et al. 2021). They can serve as 'bridges' between parallel networked spaces and can use social media as a connector between official communication channels (government, health authorities, etc.) and community members that are often disconnected from these formal channels. It is therefore of utmost importance that official crisis communication efforts include the identification of such influencers and the establishment of rapport with them as key message carriers of official information to their communities, whose members often exist in parallel communicative spaces due to contextual, knowledge or language barriers.

The use of micro-influencers to filter information to their networks and translate the key messages also represents a potential risk around misinformation and mistranslation. Another potential risk in terms of official government communication in crisis situations is the misidentification of micro-influencers who could be ‘bridges’ between official institutions and specific communities, which can undermine trust instead of increasing it. The central role of trust-building in the context of translation efforts during crises thus becomes even more important.

Trust is a fundamental component of crisis communication for all stakeholders in all directions (Curnin et al. 2015; Wray et al. 2006; Paton 2007, 2008; Steelman et al. 2015). Building trust prior to the onset of a crisis through sustained contact between key stakeholders has been associated with effective communication during a crisis (Auf Der Heide 1989; Stephenson 2005). Trust can be invested in the source of the crisis communication as well as the content of the communication (Paton 2007, 2008) and increasingly intimate relations between the source and the receiver have been linked to higher levels of trust (Arlikatti et al. 2007).

Despite its importance, trust is complex and easily confounded with other concepts such as trustworthiness, cooperation or collaboration (Guinnane 2005; Zand 2016). There is wide agreement that trusting is a mechanism for dealing with uncertainty, risk or vulnerability (e.g. Hardin 2006; Luhmann 1988; Nootboom 2002; Möllering 2006). One influential review of trust literature proposes a typology of different forms of trust (Rousseau et al. 1998) and depending on the scholar’s academic orientation—e.g. cognitive, economic, political, social, etc.—they may focus on a different form. Those with a social orientation may tend to examine trust in terms of its relational and institutional aspects (Rousseau et al. 1998). In all forms and at all levels, social trust is dynamic and contextual (Zand 2016). Social trust should be analysed within the boundaries of a particular setting or context—in our case, also the context of communities exchanging information in social media spaces.

In summary, we have argued that trust is central to crisis communication. Theories of social trust can be used to describe and explain how migrants decide to make themselves vulnerable or not to sources of pandemic communication by considering the parameters of the communicative context. We now further examine the circulation of crisis information among networked publics, the role of micro-influencers in translating COVID-19-related information and the factors affecting trust in these translation dynamics.

## **Analysis and discussion**

We carried out a study between June and November 2020 to understand the use of translation in Ireland's COVID-19 crisis communication and its role in behaviour change among diverse language communities in Ireland (for a full report on this see O'Brien et al. 2021). As part of this study, we conducted interviews with nine stakeholders representing: (1) Commissioners of translated content; (2) providers of translated content; and (3) recipients of translated content, all of whom were living in Ireland during the pandemic. More specifically, we secured interviews with:

- A representative of Ireland's Health Service Executive (HSE), which along with the Department of Health leads the government's public communication campaign around COVID-19;
- A representative of one of the language service providers contracted by the HSE to translate content during the pandemic;
- Two Brazilian nationals living in Ireland who had limited English proficiency (LEP);
- Four representatives of not-for-profit organizations operating in Ireland that deal directly with migrant workers and asylum seekers;
- One academic who specializes in minority languages, in this case Irish.<sup>1</sup>

We conducted semi-structured interviews online via Zoom with participants (lockdown restrictions prevented in-person meetings at the time). Each interview lasted between approximately 30 and 60 minutes and dealt in general with the crisis-related information needs of users of languages other than English in Ireland and evaluation of how these needs were satisfied or not during the crisis. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, confirmed by participants, and then coded using a phased, multicoder approach based on discussion, agreement and recoding. Ethical approval for this project was received from the institutional research ethics committee and all participants provided their informed consent prior to the interviews.

Our interviews did not seek to focus on the role played by social media and translation during the pandemic, but social media inevitably emerged as a topic. Three themes in particular emerged from our data, which we use here to frame our discussion on parallel pandemic spaces:

- Use of social networks and why they are important during a crisis.
- The importance of trust in the source, not just in the content.
- The importance of trust-building as a form of preparedness.

***Use of social networks and why they are important during a crisis***

We noted previously how social networks can be used in general to keep in touch with family, friends, co-workers, etc. during ‘normal’ times. Face-to-face contact was severely impeded during the worst waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and citizens increasingly turned to digital tools to maintain contact with their networks, creating an even more important parallel space during the pandemic. The need went beyond the normal human requirement for social contact to a need for information, understanding and reassurance. If one is a migrant in a foreign country, physical social circles might already be quite limited and so the isolation of a pandemic lockdown is even more severe. One would understandably turn to a parallel online space to seek information and reassurance. As one of our interviewees (P2) noted:

[...] a lot of [...] people forget that you can live in a country like Ireland as a migrant and not chat to an Irish person for a week. Maybe somebody behind the shop counter or on the bus but other than that, all your mates can be from the same place, your television at home can be, you know, online. You can be watching TV from wherever [...]

A migrant worker who took part in our interviews (P5) confirmed that she was using social media (Instagram, Facebook) for information seeking purposes and that she would have liked to have had some subtitles for some of the content in English:

I believe social media is the easiest way to have access to all the information, and it’s the way that I use personally. I have easier access to it and if they could provide some sort of subtitles as well, in those social media, that would be very helpful.

Due to the language barrier, she was sourcing most of her information during the pandemic on social media from ‘Brazilian sources’, indicating that online communicative spaces can often stretch beyond the immediate local or national context.

NGO organizations who typically provide services to such communities also confirmed that they communicated via social media platforms during the pandemic:

So we thought the only way we could actually re-engage with our clients in this pandemic is, as I said this week, we've introduced, you know, contacting them twice a week. We've used WhatsApp, we've used emails, we've used phone calls. So it reassures them that they're not left alone. It reassures them in terms of new information published by the government. And it reassures them that our services are still there as well as the government's (P4).

However, the same interviewee (P4) mentioned that WhatsApp was also being used for the dissemination of misinformation, which had been curated from sources in the migrants' home countries. The pandemic had different effects around the world at different times and so information from one country did not necessarily pertain to another. Yet, that information was being harvested and disseminated among online networks, with potentially negative outcomes. In relation to Brazilian migrant workers in Ireland, for example, P2 stated:

Their main contact is with home and at home, they are being told there's nothing to worry about, this thing could be a hoax. And so that, you know, that impacts their behaviour locally then and that can be so divisive potentially in our community because people don't understand [...]

This provides a snapshot of some of the confirmation our interviewees provided for the use and importance of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, where it was used to maintain connections in an online world, but was also a source of locally irrelevant or even contradictory information.

### ***Importance of trust in the source, not just in the content***

The global nature of the pandemic, coupled with ease of access to international information through digital platforms, including social media, meant that people could access information in many languages, some of which they needed to translate. The issue of trust arose on numerous occasions in our interviews. One interviewee (P5) stated that she generally trusted the information she read on Facebook, except for some 'sensationalist' individuals whom she then ceased to follow.

Noting that migrants are not necessarily plugged into the national, traditional media channels, another participant recorded how it was necessary to create content for dissemination to migrant communities in Ireland who were either not receiving the correct information (due to sourcing it online from abroad) or because they faced language barriers. The COVID-19 World Service was set up to address this issue: medical practitioners working in Ireland but originating from a variety of countries were asked to record translated video messages in their languages for dissemination to those language communities via WhatsApp. This approach not only broke through the language barrier, but also through an invisible trust barrier by presenting information via social media in translation through ‘community bridges’, or micro-influencers who have a similar identity to those being targeted. As P2 highlights:

There’s something, there’s something powerful in [...] See- seeing like a doctor [...] so if I was [...] We got like the doctors to say, I’m Doctor X working in Cavan, or I’m Doctor whatever working in Cork, you know what I mean? You base them in Ireland. You base them in a local [...] So the person watching the video who is a long way from home and feels kind of, especially at the moment, is quite isolated. There’s a feeling of ‘oh thank God’. I mean, there’s a respect or something or there’s a [...] that person’s [...] and we’re together in this. I don’t know [...] That is more than language. It’s more than information. It’s belonging, and with that sense of belonging I think the person buys into the national approach to this thing.

Inevitably, those who were struggling to understand the information being broadcast in their adopted countries turned to machine translating information that was posted on social media. One of the migrant workers interviewed mentioned using Google Translate, despite the fact that she did not really trust it: ‘I use a lot Google, which I shouldn’t [...] Because it’s a really literal translation, so sometimes I put a phrase in there and I can see that it’s totally not working, and that’s why I really don’t trust it’ (P9).

It is not only technology that is mistrusted, however, but also the State as a source of information. In some countries, the majority of the population would trust information provided by official government sources. In others, where corruption is rife, for example, people might be less trusting of government-issued information. This level of mistrust can be imported when a person migrates to a new setting, forcing

them to seek alternative sources of information, possibly via social media. One of our interviewees (P1) spoke about having to ‘really work with community leaders to [...] get messages out’. Furthermore, migrants may have experienced very difficult journeys getting to countries where they seek asylum and these journeys, and their encounters along the way, including in their host countries, may also have eroded their ability to trust people in power, leading them to seek trusted sources back home through social media.

This data from our interviews underlines that trust in information plays an important role in a crisis in general, but, as mentioned previously, trust is a complex topic. Here we have shown that many factors contribute to the calculation of trust in translated communication via social media, including the source of the information (people or technology), how close a communicator is in identity to the targeted recipient, and prior experience of interactions with state or government authorities.

### ***Trust building via social media as a form of preparedness***

Preparedness is a key component in Disaster Risk Reduction (Paton 2003). We can expect that disasters will occur and that they will be of different scales across varied timelines. We also understand that one disastrous event (or a smaller-scale crisis) can have cascading effects, a recent example being the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (Norio et al. 2011; McGee et al. 2016). Some disasters are more predictable than others. Nonetheless, we can be prepared for those that we know are likely to occur. Despite predictions and warnings (Morens et al. 2020; MacKenzie 2020), the global COVID-19 pandemic found many countries in various states of unpreparedness. One of the learnings we can take from this pandemic is that we need to be prepared for translating crisis communication.

We understand the relevance and importance of social media as tools for crisis communication and as networked publics (boyd 2010). Taking the two-step flow model of communication (Nisbet and Kotcher 2009; Choi 2015), which highlights the important role of micro-influencers in establishing trust, we can propose the use of micro-influencers as translators for crisis preparedness via social media. Evidence of this line of thinking was already emerging from our interview data. For instance, P8 who works with a migrant rights group in Ireland outlined their model as:

[...] to really ensure that gatekeepers and leaders in communities have the information and that information is then shared amongst

family and friends networks, kind of like targeted Facebook ads, translated as well [...]

P8 went on to emphasize that the ‘gatekeepers’ had to be ‘trusted voices’ in the community. It is logical to add that those trusted translating voices must have a presence in the parallel physical and digital spheres in their communities, especially in a crisis such as a pandemic.

P7, a representative of an information service provider to migrants and refugees in Ireland, highlighted the importance of the micro-influencers, too:

We have amazing technology these days to produce, you know, a place where people can go for information. And it would be really useful for us, as service providers, to have something to rely on. And I think service providers would absolutely take that to heart and would want to promote that. So, you know, that would be a mechanism of *creating trust*, by having that *referral pathway* from some *organizations that were already trusted* (emphasis added).

It is difficult to establish these ‘referral pathways’ during the response stage of a crisis when chaos can reign, which brings us back to the topic of preparedness. Emergency response organizations need to first recognize the need for translation in crisis situations. They then need to (continuously) assess the language and communication needs by examining language and literacy barriers and, not least, they need to establish bridging relationships through trusted stakeholders for those communities, online and physically, as a form of preparedness.

Alternative pathways might seem viable, but COVID-19 demonstrated that, at least in Ireland and probably in many other countries, traditional pathways for disseminating information were not adequate for migrant communities. For example, many migrants in Ireland did not have a relationship with their GP (General Practitioner, or doctor–P7), they had never heard of the HSE, nor could they easily find the translated information in 26 languages on the HSE website, and they most likely did not watch or listen to the national broadcasting channels where much of the information was being disseminated (P2). A significant number of these migrants hold jobs that continued to operate during the pandemic (e.g. public transport, meat-processing plants). There was some reliance, then, on employers to disseminate information, but one of our migrant workers (P9) noted: ‘I did trust the social media even more, to be honest, because

it was quicker. The employer, it took so long in between the communications [...] So that's why I kind of trust the internet more'.

Community organizations have a very important role to play here, too. As an example of trust-building prior to the pandemic, P2 described the organization called 'Sanctuary Runners' which was established in 2018 in Ireland ([sanctuaryrunners.ie](http://sanctuaryrunners.ie); @SanctuaryRunner), to offer solidarity, friendship and respect—through running—to people who had arrived in Ireland seeking asylum (these people are housed in what are called 'Direct Provision Centres'<sup>2</sup>). There was a connection between this group of people and the COVID-19 World Service, mentioned earlier. P2 highlights the essential trusting link between the running group and the dissemination of translated videos during the pandemic, which was facilitated via social media:

[...] the Sanctuary Runners is about 2000 sanctuary runners, right, so this is very specifically to do with direct provision centres. So we'd have about five or six hundred people in direct provision centres who run with us or hang out with us or who know us and who trust us and we [...] they know we're not doing it out of charity. It's very much a solidarity thing. So there is trust in there, you know, so this, that was particularly useful when we were doing the videos before this service, you know what I mean? People would trust us where they wouldn't necessarily trust somebody from the government department [...].

While not planned as a formal type of preparedness, it is clear that this community initiative contributed to the building of trust relationships prior to the pandemic, which were then leveraged for good during the pandemic itself. Initiatives like Sanctuary Runners tend to exist in parallel spaces, too. While they congregate in a physical location to run, they also use social media to coordinate their physical activities, stay in touch, share and deepen their connections. They constitute readymade networks of communication and trust that can be leveraged as spaces for crisis translation.

Translated crisis information might be posted by official service providers via social media, as well as through traditional channels such as print, radio, etc. The service providers need to engage professional translators, or sometimes interpreters, to produce these translations and consequently need to have trusting relationships with those professionals. Indeed, we found that having a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) in place between the HSE and their Language Service Provider prior to the onset of the pandemic contributed significantly to

a trusting relationship that facilitated speedy production of professional translation (O'Brien et al. 2021). The argument is often put forward in professional and academic translation settings that 'non-professionals'—or at least what they produce—cannot be trusted. Detailed discussion on this debate is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is interesting to note that the opposite view was held by some interview participants:

Some of the work we do has volunteer interpreters, as in, like, kind of friends and family, which, you know, played a lot of different roles in meetings with workers. There's a lot of trust involved there. There's, you know, information [...] you're able to get the working terms and conditions. Just because there's a lot of trust in the room (P8).

I think it's so much better if you, if we had an interpreter that ended up being from the same town as someone's cousin. And then that kind of, I think there is a different level of trust (P8).

At the same time P8 recognized that much depended on the context of the communication and if, for example, legal information was being disseminated then 'you have to have that kind of professional consecutive interpreting'. This counter-view reminds us that trust is dynamic and contextual (Zand 2016). For crisis contexts, trust-building needs to take place as a form of preparedness, which involves the identification of trusted voices as micro-influencers within communities and their preparation for occupying and connecting parallel pandemic spaces, when required.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to highlight the essential role played by social media networks in disseminating translated information throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. More than simply highlighting the importance of this medium, we aimed to raise awareness of the intricacies of translated communications in social media and the potential challenges they pose. We first noted how social media enable us to create parallel online spaces and communities in general, then turned attention to how the global characteristics of the pandemic, as well as the local physical lockdowns, enhanced the need for these parallel pandemic spaces. The need for accurate and timely *local* information was high, but language proved to be a barrier for some, pushing them

towards information-seeking in other languages, from other jurisdictions, as well as towards the need for translation, much of which was facilitated via social media. However, ease of access to information in a language that can be understood from another geographical location potentially led to disinformation, or at least information that was not relevant for the physical space occupied by the information-seeker, which emphasizes the need for translation of locally relevant crisis information via social media, among other platforms.

We documented, through interview data from the Irish COVID-19 context, that social media platforms were indeed used by migrants and service providers for those communities. Trust emerged as a major consideration and is a complex and context-dependent commodity, influenced by the source of the information, the context and prior experience. Trust cannot be constructed in a crisis simply by using professional translators or interpreters, especially not for social media content. This challenges the notion held in professional and academic settings that professional translation is the only ethically acceptable model in a crisis context. Social media users will translate at will, using friends, neighbours and machine translation (MT) systems, or they may bypass the need for translation by sourcing information from their home countries, potentially resulting in misleading and dangerous advice. Trust needs to be established as a crisis preparedness action so that social media crisis communication can be effective. Examples of how this can be achieved include grassroots community integration initiatives and the identification and onboarding of translating micro-influencers by those responsible for crisis communication. Professional translation and interpreting play a role for some contexts, but cannot be an exclusive strategy for chaotic, rapidly changing, life-threatening situations. Additionally, we have noted elsewhere (Federici et al. 2019) the need for *two-way* communication in a crisis (symbiotic exchange as mentioned by Desjardins 2017), something that is very easily facilitated from a technical perspective on social media. The concept of ‘bridges’—trusted influencers who liaise between communities and service providers—is ideal here.

We close by acknowledging that there is a risk associated with this approach as those who present themselves as ‘bridges’ or influencers may not necessarily be accepted by targeted communities, or by all members of those communities, or may not be adequate translators of information. As with all crisis communication initiatives, no one channel should be relied upon and proper preparedness also includes gaining contextual knowledge of target communities and their needs.

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## Notes

- 1 We refer to our interviewees here as 'P1', 'P2', etc. for participants 1, 2 and so on.
- 2 For more information about Direct Provision Centres in Ireland, see <https://bit.ly/3cybRS1>

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